



James F. Byrnes : Distinguished American

BY LOUISE PETTUS
AND RON CHEPESUIK

No South Carolinian in the 20th century has had a record of public service to equal that of James F. Byrnes. Diplomat, politician and judge, Jimmy Byrnes served his country ably in both peace and war.

Byrnes was born May 2, 1879, in a small house on King Street in Charleston. His father died a few months after his birth. With no money and a large family to support, his mother went into the dressmaking business.

Young Jimmy was a brilliant student but left school at 14 to help support his family.

In 1906 Byrnes was appointed official court stenographer for the Second Judicial Circuit of South Carolina. He left Charleston with his mother to take up his new position in Aiken. While in Aiken he also studied law in the office of Judge James Aldrich.

He even had the time and resourcefulness to edit a newspaper which he had bought with a friend. Within two years of its purchase, the newspaper was paid for by its young owners.

In 1903 Byrnes was appointed to the bar. Three years later, on his birthday, he married Maude Perkins Busch of Aiken.

Byrnes resigned his court reporter's job in 1908 and ran successfully for solicitor of the second judicial circuit, a position equivalent to district attorney.

He was elected to a seat in Congress in 1910. Years later he said about his election, "I campaigned on nothing but gall, and gall won by 59 votes."

James Byrnes served in Congress for 15 years. One of his committee assignments was membership on the Deficiency Committee of the Appropriations Committee, making him one of the three House members having control over the financial affairs of the country.

After his unsuccessful run for a Senate seat in 1924, he moved to Spartanburg to practice law. His law practice was lucrative, and he became a well-known trial lawyer.

However Washington, the hub of political power, still appealed to him, and he won a Senate seat in 1930. Byrnes' political career moved rapidly, and he became one of the most powerful men in the Senate. He developed a close relationship with Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the early 1930s, helping Roosevelt get nominated as the Democratic candidate for president.

Initially, James Byrnes was a strong supporter of Roosevelt's New Deal program, and he helped the president to get legislation passed through Congress. Later however, he supporter many conservative measures against Roosevelt's program.

Byrnes' political prominence in Washington helped him win reelection in 1936. He achieved a landslide victory, winning every precinct except one.

In 1941 Byrnes was appointed associate justice of United States Supreme Court. But his career on the Supreme Court was brief.

In 1942, with the American war effort gearing toward full production, Byrnes resigned his appointment at the request of President Roosevelt to become director of economic stabilization. His job was to ensure that the country produced the necessary materials for the war effort. The position was important enough for Byrnes to have his office in the White House.

In this office, which later became the Office of War Mobilization, Jimmy Byrnes had political power second only to the president's. Roosevelt referred to Jimmy Byrnes as his "assistant president."

In addition to Byrnes' knowledge and experience in domestic matters, he also made contributions to foreign affairs. At Roosevelt's insistence, Byrnes accompanied the president to Yalta in 1943 to confer with Churchill and Stalin. After the war, Byrnes headed the American delegation to the first session of the United Nations held in London.

When Roosevelt began his campaign in 1944 for his unprecedented fourth term, most political observers thought Byrnes would be nominated as his running mate. After all, Byrnes had a tremendous record of public service and had helped President Roosevelt immeasurably in the political arena.

Instead, Harry S. Truman got the nomination. When Roosevelt died in 1945, Truman and not Byrnes became president.

In 1945 James F. Byrnes was awarded a Distinguished Service Medal for his part in the war effort. In the same year he was appointed secretary of state by President Truman.

In 1947 Byrnes resigned as secretary of state and returned to South Carolina. He resumed his law practice in Spartanburg.

Once again James Byrnes became a public servant. This time he was to serve South Carolina. He was easily elected as governor in 1950 and served till 1955.

During his term of office he was an advocate for legislation supporting education.

After his four-year term as governor expired, he once again retired from public life. On April 9, 1972, James F. Byrnes died.

The 100-year anniversary of Byrnes' birth was celebrated May 2, 1979. A statue was unveiled on the Statehouse grounds in Columbia, a lasting tribute to this century's greatest South Carolina statesman.